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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of Palestinian libraries. The following topics are addressed: historical and political background on Palestine; the Ansari Public Library in East Jerusalem; the Khalidi Family Library in the Old City of Jerusalem; mosque libraries; the Nablus Public Library; the Palestinian Library and Information Association; other public libraries; public libraries run by nongovernmental organizations; funding; fees; special libraries in Palestine; the impact on libraries of the Israeli occupation of Palestine; censorship; university libraries; library and information science education; school libraries; general features of Palestinian libraries; information and communication technology; and obstacles and possibilities for developing libraries. (MES)

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Libraries in the West Bank and Gaza: Obstacles and possibilities

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Paper

Introduction

Good morning. My name is Erling Bergan, and I will in the next 45 minutes take you for a short trip to the other side and the library situation there. I have come to know many of you through the last days events, especially on the tour some of us had to Gaza on Monday. So I realize that some of the things I have to say, will not be new to everybody here. You just have to bear with me.

Let me introduce myself briefly before we start. I have studied social science and librarianship, graduated in 1980, worked 10 years in public libraries, 10 years in academic libraries, five of those as library director of a college, and at present my main job is as editor of the journal for the Norwegian Librarian's Union.

My connection to Palestine started in 1989, when I was asked to give advice on the development of a medical library for the Palestine Hospital in Cairo. This evolved into different engagements as consultant for library development in the palestinian refugee community in Cairo, and later in the new self-rule area for palestinians in Gaza. During the years, I have also written some articles on the libraries in Palestine. Though I am a foreigner to the Arabic language, I beleive I have aquired some understanding of the palestinian library situation, enough to give you a rough guide into this territory. Concerning the obstacles and possibilities - I hope you will see them as we go along.

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Moving to the other side

I said I would take you to the other side. And after lunch we will do it for real. But for now, imagine leaving the conference center here in West Jerusalem, find your way through Jaffa Street, pass by the Russian Compound - where Israel has its famous big prison for detaining and interrogating palestinian prisoners, you also pass by the huge Notre Dame-building, where the Pope's representatives in Jerusalem resides, cross the invisible green line dividing Jerusalem at Levi Eshkol Street and enter into Ibn Al-Aas Street. You will probably pass by a small building on your left hand side without even noticing it. If you come there when school is out, you may wonder why some children are hanging around there or maybe standing in line to get in. There are no signs indicating that if you go through the narrow passageway to the back of this building, and down the stairs into a small basement-room, you will find yourself in a library of great importance.

Though it is a private library built up by one man and his thirst for free and uncensored knowledge, and though it to some extent is used as a neighbourhood public library, it does in fact have collections that in other countries would give it a role more comparable to a part of a National Library or a Central Archive. It currently contains over 40.000 books in Arabic, many of them unique, including about 65 % of all the books that were ever published in Palestine since 1862. It contains maybe the most extensive and growing collection of Palestinian newspapers and periodicals - dating back to 1910. It also contains a growing collection of some 25.000 books, periodicals and reference works in English and French. All packed into only 135 square meters of a basement room.

I am not telling you about this library - called the Ansari Public Library, after its founder Fahmi Al-Ansari - because it is the typical palestinian library. But the Ansari Library is a good starting point for a description of some of the obstacles and possibilities of libraries in Palestine. Before I give you a short history of this library, I have to broaden the picture for some minutes. Many of you are probably familiar with the history of the region, and the palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular. But for those of you who are not, let me give my very short version. I feel this is necessary, in order to put the points I make about libraries in context. For those of you who are going to Bethlehem later today, this short political history could be useful as background.

Historical and political background

So here is a brief historical and political background to the area. What is Palestine? The history is long, and events dating many thousand years back play an important role in todays situation. But I will restrict myself to start with the British rule of the area they called Palestine, from the end of the First World War until 1948, at which time the United Nations planned to divide the area between the Jews and the Arabs. The Arabs rejected the division, and the state of Israel was established unilateraly, in the midst of battles being fought over the land. In this situation, there was no ground for a separate Palestinian state. So The Gaza Strip came under rule of neighboring Egypt, The West Bank came under rule of neighboring Jordan. 714.000 Palestians fled from the areas that came under Israeli rule and became refugees. They fled to the West Bank and Gaza, to neighboring Arab countries and to some extent also to other parts of the world.

At the same time, the emigration of Jews in diaspora to Israel escalated. The result of these processes was a dramatic shift in the demographic and political situation in the area. After the six-day war in 1967, when Israel occupied Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, 380.000 Palestinians in these areas fled once again,

mostly to neighboring Arab countries, some of them becoming refugees for the second time. The total number of Palestinian refugees registered by the UN is at the moment more than 3,7 million people. Roughly 0,8 million in Gaza, 0,6 million in The West Bank, 1,5 million in Jordan and 0,8 million in Lebanon and Syria. Of these 3,7 million, more than 1,2 million still live in refugee camps. The UN has since 1949 had a large operation called UNRWA, in order to help organize civil services like schools and hospitals for this population.

In the period between 1967 and now, large numbers of Israelis established settlements inside the West Bank and in the Gaza strip, as secluded communities on hilltops, without any integration with the neighboring palestinian cities, towns and villages. There are now more than 190 such armed Israeli settlements inside The West Bank and Gaza, with a total population of 200.000, and occupying about 50 % of the land.

The conflict between Israel and the palestinians has since 1948 developed into wars, terrorism, military oppression and political sanctions. From 1987 to 1991, the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank organized an uprising against the occupation, also known as the Intifada. This brought the attention of the world to the illegal occupation and the conditions for the refugees.

Since the establishment of Israel, there had been no open or substantial negotiations, since the two sides did not accept the existence of each other as nations or states. Until nearly ten years ago, when open negotiations were held in Madrid, while secret negotiations were held in Oslo. As we know, the Oslo-channel resulted in a process which gave us the reluctant hand-shake between Yitchak Rabin and Yassir Arafat, it gave us the start of limited Palestinian self-rule in certain areas of the West Bank and Gaza, and a number of disputed questions to be resolved in a negotiating process to be finalized this summer. Among the disputed - and still unresolved - questions are big issues like the status of Jerusalem and the destiny of the palestinian refugees.

This brief historic and political background has to be short and simplified, and therefore leaves out big events, terrible disasters and important perspectives, which in another context would be essential. Nonetheless, it was necessary for me to give you this outline, to make the explanation of the library situation more understandable. Hopefully it will also help you understand better the off-site part of this work-shop, to take place this afternoon.

So when I now tell you that I will concentrate on the situation of the palestinian libraries in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, you know what I mean.

Ansari Public Library

Back to the Ansari Library in East Jerusalem. When Fahmi Ansari was studying at a Jerusalem high school in 1959 for his matriculation, he found that he needed books that neither his school, nor any library in Jerusalem could provide him with. What he needed was nothing special, just slightly more advanced knowledge than the schoolbooks could give him. And he needed it in his native tongue, not in any foreign language that he could not yet read. Jerusalems municipal library was too impoversihed by the war. A number of private libraries existed, but were either too exclusive or too narrow in the the languages or subjects they covered. Frustrated by this, Fahmi Ansari spent all his pocket money on books. Without being concious of it, he started building the library which I started out by telling you about. But gradually the dream grew of opening his private library to the public. He continued buying books during his studies at the universities in Damascus and Jerusalem, and during his many years of work as a school-teacher and researcher. His aquisitions did not come from family money - a form of library collection building which in earlier times played a role in the area - I will come back to that in a little while. His collection is

built on what he has bought himself, from other libraries that have been closed down, and from private donations.

The Ansari Library opened in 1985, starting with 20.000 books, 75 % of which were in Arabic. His efforts were appreciated by palestinians, not only because Jerusalems municipal library had been shut down and looted by the Israeli occupation forces following the war of 1967, but also because the Israeli censorship was strict. The Ansari Library is now looking for a major donor, to be able to creep up of their current basement-room and make the collections more available to researchers and the general public. At present they have a yearly budget of some USD 25.000. Their premises are rent-free, their staff are mainly volunteers and their future is as uncertain as it is for the whole palestinian community in Jerusalem.

Khalidi Family Library

I mentioned that family libraries have a tradition in the area, but in another way than the Ansari Library. Let me exemplify this with the Khalidi Family Library in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Close to the Temple Mount in the Old City lies the family houses of the Khalidi family, with Haifa Khalidi now residing there with her family. For many generations, people of her family have been well-off lawyers, working in the sharia courts (the islamic judicial system). Through their work and general cultural interests, and being able to afford it, they built up a substantial library of old manuscripts, book-treasures and contemporary literature on sharia law. They established their collection as a library in 1900. During the first half of this century, it was an open library to friends, neighbours and visiting scholars. Other important families in the palestinian society had private libraries of the same kind, and there was actually a competition between the wealthy Jerusalem families of having the largest and best library collection. And there was a tradition of - to some extent - opening these libraries to the public. They played in a role as public libraries - to some - , when municipal public libraries did not exist. Most of these private family libraries have ceased to exist. But Haifa Khalidi has kept her family library together, renovated and refurnished the premises for the library in the Old City, and can - by appointment show you a beautiful and precious library, not open to the general public. Today the collection consists of about 5000 books and 1200 manuscripts, some of them dating 1000 years back. There are now very few new books added to the collection.

These old family libraries are important in the library history of Palestine. But in modern library terms, they no longer play any role as public or scholarly libraries. These libraries have stopped their aquisition long time ago. And most of them have ceased to exist. Some have been confiscated by the Israelis. Parts of one of these palestinian family libraries can be found today in the Israeli Hebrew University Library at Mount Scopus.

Mosque libraries

Another type of libraries that have played a historic role in Palestine, and indeed in the whole Arab world, are the mosque libraries. These are deeply rooted in Islamic religion and Arab civilization. In what we westerners call The Middle Ages, the Muslim Empire stretched from China in the East to Spain in the West. To survive this stretch, Islam had to be adaptable and receptive to other cultures, and so the need for knowledge and books became evident.

And so there were schools being established in connection to the mosques, and there were libraries established in connection to both. Although the Prophet Mohammed

himself could not read or write, he very much promoted reading and learning. Like the early Christian churches and monasteries, mosques were among the first places in Muslim society where books were to be found. Most of these mosque libraries were modest, but some had large and valuable collections. The Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem is one example. Today you still find these mosque libraries many places in Palestine, and they are functioning. In the city of El Bireh, for instance, the public library does not buy much religious literature, as this is found in the nearby mosque library. And they both use the same computer system for their libraries. But in general, the importance of these libraries are said to have become greatly limited today.

Nablus Public Library

So where are the libraries that play an important role in today's palestinian society? Let us have a look at the public libraries first. In this group we find both the ordinary municipal libraries, but also private libraries that are run like public libraries. Let's have a look at the municipal libraries first.

In the largest cities of the West Bank, like Nablus, Ramallah, Bireh, the municipalities started public libraries some 30-40 years ago, when they were under Jordanian rule. The public library in Nablus, the West Banks biggest city - with a population of 120.000 people, was established in 1960. The library has 27 employees, 4 of which are educated in library science. Their collection consists of close to 70.000 volumes, 80 % of which are in Arabic. They also have journal subscriptions - a very vulnerable part of library work in Palestine, due to the long-time israeli censorship, import restrictions, problems in communications and postal services, and the rising prices of journal subscriptions. (I will come back to some of these factors.) Their catalog and lendings are partly computerized, by use of a locally developed system. They have recently opened a children's department. The library also includes special collections, like the documentation center, with palestinian newspapers dating back to the twenties, and official ("offentlige") documents from the North of Palestine from the beginning of the 18th century. Of special significance is the collection of sharia court documents from the North of Palestine from the period 1917-1949, that is the British Mandate Period. This is one plattform - of many - that the new judicial system in Palestine has to build on. (There are many judicial systems that play a role in todays Palestine: Ottoman laws, British Mandate Laws, Jordanian law, Egyptian law, Israeli Military Orders, Israeli Civil Laws in East Jerusalem, Palestine National Authority Laws, and negotiated treaties - all these play important roles in the everyday life and movements of palestinians.)

The public library in Nablus claims to have about 500 visitors pr. day, and a circulation af 300 books lent out per day. They do not participate in any inter-library lending system. During the intifadah, the library held open while the schools and the An Najah University were closed. This gave the library an important role as a substitute for schools and universities. Even 5 years after the end of the intifadah, 60 % of the people using the library, are students from schools or university.

The director of the public library in Nablus, is - by the way - also the president of the Palestinian Library and Information Association, an organization I will just briefly comment on.

The Palestinian Library and Information Association

After years of trying to gather the library people of Palestine to establish an organization, they did not succeed before 1994. The travel restrictions given in israeli military orders, and the even stronger restrictions they put on gathering palestinians

for meetings, made it impossible for them to put an organization together before just over 5 years ago. Maybe it should make us librarians a little proud, of the importance given to us by forces wishing to hinder self-conciousness and democratic developments. Other professions were allowed to organize themselves, though they also have heavy restrictions on their activities. But the librarians did not get permission to establish their own organization before 1994.

I must mention that the librarian at the British Council in East Jerusalem, with the liberties she enjoyed in travelling and communication, has played a crucial part in many aspects of the development of a professional library community in Palestine, not least in establishing the PLIA.

The organization is still small and weak, barely managing to run some activities, like holding some seminars and work-shops, to some degree coordinating classification practices, and holding some meetings.

Other public libraries

So is Nablus Public Library typical of the public libraries in Palestine? If we look at the other big cities, we find some that are comparable to Nablus, like those in the twin cities of Ramallah and El Bireh, 20 minutes north of Jerusalem. Ramallah Public Library is in a three story building, spreading its activities on 900 square meters, their book-collection consists of 40.000 volumes, and they receive an average of 250 visits daily. But they are only staffed with 5 people. The library building in El Bireh is of approximately the same size as in Ramallah, but they only have 15.000 volumes and a staff of 6. Both libraries have separate parts for children and separate reading and reference sections. In El Bireh, the library has about 120 visitors daily, a large proportion of these being students. So together with Nablus, these two cities probably have the best working public libraries in Palestine.

In the other cities, like Tulkarm, Jenin, Hebron and Jericho in the West Bank, and Gaza City and Rafah in the Gaza Strip, there are functioning public libraries of various sizes, and in the town of Qalqilya they are in the process of establishing a public library. But in Bethlehem, there is still no public library run by the municipality. And in the municipalities consisting of smaller towns and villages, there are barely any municipal public libraries.

Public libraries run by NGOs

But in addition to these, there are many public libraries run by NGOs. In Bethlehem you find a fairly big library that has the name Bethlehem Public Library written on a sign over the door. It is really the school library of the Bethlehem Bible College that has opened its doors to the public. So if you are not interested in Christianity, only some 25 % of the 30.000 volumes would be of interest to you. On the shelf for science-books, you find titles like "In God's waiting-room : Learning through suffering", and "I believe in miracles". But it is a professionally run library, with computerized catalog, a small children's section and a separate room where the users can access internet on six computers, for a small fee.

The way they access internet in some Palestinian libraries, is actually quite innovative. But I will get back to computerization and internet in Palestine later in this paper. First some more on the non-municipal public libraries.

Another public library with a religious bias, is the Pontifical Mission Library at Notre Dame, the Pope's huge building overlooking the Old City.

Later today we will visit two Cultural Centers for children and youth, where libraries - even though they are quite modest - play an important role. Some of us went to the Holst Center in Gaza City on Monday, and saw the same thing there. These centers are dependent on external funding, sponsoring of certain activities, special donations, or time-limited projects financed by foreign aid-organizations, governments or solidarity groups. And these centers are also very dependent on the attitudes, knowledge and commitment of the people in daily charge of the institution.

In the Old City of Jerusalem, if you still have some time left and want to explore more of that part of the city, you may go down Suq Khan Ez-Zeit, which is the right-hand choice just inside Damascus Gate, and after 2 - 300 meters turn left into a street called El Saraya. There you find a beautiful place called The Saraya Center, with a library of about 5.000 volumes, on the second floor. After school, lots of children come here to read, and do their homework. For a membership fee of 30 NIS pr. month, schoolchildren can get regular guidance while doing their homework, from teachers or teacher-assistants. The whole operation is sponsored from a number of sources, and they have no relationships with other libraries. This is common among these private public libraries, which seldom are members of the Palestinian Library Association.

If you go the northern part of Gaza City, you will find a small public library where many of the users also are youth reading non-fiction in a variety of subjects. It is run by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and the usage is said to be constantly high. In the southern town of Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, the same Society runs a big Culture and Rehabilitation Center, also with a library open to the public.

These libraries are just mentioned to give you an impression of a library landscape where very different libraries serving the general public, will live side by side for a long time to come. This is probably both necessary and wise, since much of the economy of the Palestinian society is dependent on foreign funding, and since donors prefer supporting a variety in types of organizations.

Funding

This brings me to say a few words on the funding of palestinian libraries. The public libraries run by the municipalities do not necessarily get all their funding from the municipality. In the city of El Bireh, the budget from the municipality is only about 15.000 US dollars yearly, for buying books and journals. In 1997 they received a donation from the Japanese Embassy of 60.000 US dollars, to buy books, furniture and computers to establish the childrens section of the library. In Ramallah Public Library, there is French funding of the children's library and their computer section. The new public library in Gaza is also funded from France.

Apart from the clear impression that most libraries are short of money, I have yet to get a good overview of the total economic situation of the palestinian libraries. According to a report on Palestinian Libraries - of all kinds - made by the British Council and the Palstinian Ministry of Culture in 1996, 26 % of the library-budgets in Palestine was used to buy books, while 15 % was used on salaries. This tells us that housing, equipment, telephone and other administrative costs are relatively high in Palestine, while manpower is relatively cheap.

Fees

Concerning fees, there is a common tradition of collecting fees from those registering as members - or users - of a library. The sum is seldom big, but it is often argued that even a symbolic fee is enough to make potential users regard the library as serious and useful.

Libraries seldom take fees for borrowing. The option they rather turn to, is stopping borrowing of books all together. Calculating with a certain percentage of books disappearing every year, is not something palestinian libraries tend to accept.

Special libraries in Palestine

In the survey of Palestinian libraries from 1996 that I mentioned earlier, they looked at 295 libraries in Palestine. More than a hundred of these were special libraries. This is - in my view - a special feature of this society. Every company, organization or institution seems to have their own library, to support their staff and as a part of their activities. In addition it seems to have a symbolic purpose. Like the old families competed in having the biggest and best libraries, so do the different NGOs also seem to build library collections to "show off". But most of these libraries are visited by quite a lot of people, and play an important part among the intellectual classes of Palestine. Some of these libraries are also political important institutions. Let me mention a few examples.

Just by the Israeli Military check-point between Jerusalem and Ramallah, you can find the Women's Studies Center Library, a collection and a service clearly focused on women's issues and feminist aspects of a variety of subjects. It is funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and used by University students and academics.

In Ramallah, you have the humans right organization Al Haq, with a small but very good library, run by a professional librarian. Spread around Palestine, you find other NGOs on environmental issues, refugee questions, campaigns against illiteracy, - you find libraries for governmental offices like the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, and so on.

Maybe one of the most famous institutions is The Arab Studies Society in Orient House, the headquarters of the inofficial mayor of East Jerusalem, Feisal Husseini. This institution contains an important library and valuable archives. Historic and contemporary material of political significance is stored here, and the library staff has through the years made it accessible through building subject catalogs, open shelving, photocopying services and so on. I have spent some time there myself, and have found it useful on material from some decades ago. Current aquisition seems to have dropped the last years. The Arab Studies Society is probably - as the Ansari Library I mentioned first - an important part of what could develop into a Palestinian National Library.

Occupation and the libraries

The Library in The Orient House, is a good example of how the Israeli occupation of Palestine has had an impact on libraries. When i first visited Orient House in 1994, Salim El Bast was in charge of the library. Every morning he left his home in Ramallah, drove the 20 minutes it took to get to his work in Jerusalem. A couple of years later, I came back and asked for Salim. But he had to quit, because he did not have the necessary permits from the Israeli military forces that would allow him to pass the checkpoint outside Jerusalem any more. Now you find him in charge of the public library in Bireh.

The story is not special at all. Restrictions on palestinian people and goods travelling in Palestine has always been great, though not always followed up so harshly at the checkpoints. This summer, the Israeli soldiers seem to be more at ease than usual. But when the going gets tough, the restrictions and checkpoints introduced since the Oslo-process started, are more numerous than ever. Imagine what this does to a

library community trying get their act together. Meetings that are impossible to hold, inter-library loans that can not be executed, ordered books that come months to late or never show up, and so on.

When the intifada started, the Israelis shut down Orient House, and kept it closed for 4 years. When the staff eventually was allowed to enter the building again in 1992, they found the subject catalog removed and destroyed. 5 years of work was wasted. A number of documents were also confiscated. In addition, the library users from before the intifada, residing on the West Bank, found themselves stopped at the checkpoints around Jerusalem. The number of visitors to the library dropped by 50 %, compared to before the intifada. Many central institutions for all palestinians are situated in East Jerusalem, and have experienced the same reductions. It is obviously a part of Israeli policy to deminish the importance of East Jerusalem as a Center for Palestinians.

And let me give you one last example, to show how this goes on today also. On the 7th of August this year, the Palestinian Library and Information Association were to have a conference on "Libraries, Internet and the Information Age" at the Ambassador Hotel here in Jerusalem. It was a purely professional conference, not a political one. When the Israeli Police in Jerusalem heard about it, they told the manager of the hotel that this was official palestinian activity inside Jerusalem, and therefore not allowed. The manager checked, and told the police it was a professional conference. The police replied by simply threatening to shut down the hotel if the conference was to take place. The Library Association was forced to cancel. This happened a week ago, in the city of Jerusalem.

Which brings me to mention briefly the reason why you barely find any Middle Eastern librarians at the conference this year. When the country where the conference is held, when the Israeli authorities, cannot assure that all librarians who want to participate, will be allowed into the country, and since the conference is demonstratively held only on the west side of this "undivided" city, the Palestinian librarians - and their fellow Arab colleagues - have decided to boycot this conference. Which should not be difficult to understand, although not accepted, by colleagues participating here. And by saying this, I hope I also have given a reasonable explanation of why a norwegian librarian is delivering this paper, and not a palestinian one, which definitly would have been more appropriate.

Censorship

Now that I have described the library-implications of the lack of freedom of movement, I must be quick to add that aquisitions made to libraries have not been safe even though they managed to come to the library shelves. From 1967 when Israels occupation of The West Bank and Gaza started, and up to this day, Israeli censorship has been hard. Since these areas have been governed by the Israeli military, and not by civil law, the issued Military Orders have come hard down on all democratic activity. Through the years, many Israeli Military Orders banning specific book titles, have been issued. The list reached at one point Kafkaesque proportions, when titles like George Orwell's 1984 was on one of the 60 lists of prohibited books, that included more than 1.600 titles. When this became publicly known in the international press twenty years ago, the lists were revised, only to come out with a new master list of 1.002 censored titles. In a few years some 600 additional titles were included. The list did not include well known works of world literature anymore, but it included every work that expressed or aroused Palestinian national feelings. The word Palestine in the title, was enough.

Considering the impact of Israeli censorship, you must remember that since 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, have not had any possibilities of going abroad without passing through Israel or a Israeli checkpoint. This is still the case. So

even though the Isarelis can no longer go into the libraries that are in the areas now controlled by the Palestinians, they still control all people and goods going in and out of these areas.

In the current situation, there is every reason to keep an open eye on the censorship the Palestinian National Authority exercises. So far there have been many reports on breaches of human rights, censorship by closing down newspapers, radiostations and TV-stations that are too critical. But I have not heard of any direct censorship on the import of books and magazines, or of confiscations in libraries. But attacks on those who exercise their freedom of expression at an earlier stage in the literary chain: authors, publishers, journalists, academics, and so on, of course affect how free a library should be considered. Before Oslo, the Israeli occupation forces attacked every part of the literary chain, even going in to peoples homes to confiscate books. And authors and academics started self-censoring themselves. The Palestinian Authorities should be criticised just as vigorously, both from within and without Palestine, when they show tendencies to go down the same path.

University libraries

Though I expect this section of IFLA to be more interested in public than in academic libraries, let med say a few words about university libraries in Palestine. There are 8 institutions that you can call universities, some of them fairly well known also outside Palestine.

Bir Zeit outside Ramallah is the most famous, both for the political impact the student activities have had here, but also for their relations with foreign universities. They have a collection of some 110.000 books, 2/3 of which are in English, and a staff of 26. Most of them have academic education, but few in library science. Their catalog and circulation is computerized, they have their own web-services, and a fairly new and big library building on campus. Bir Zeit University Library is among the top academic libraries in Palestine.

In Nablus, the An-Najah University Library is situated in a big, new and beautiful building. They have some more books than Bir Zeit (130.000), but suffered heavily from the closures before and during the intifada. From 1986-1994, the aquisition stopped alltogether. They have got their budgets somewhat up again since the economic disasters that hit Palestine after the Gulf War, but the 22 persons working in the library have no problems finding space to shelve new aquisitions. They have computerized their catalog and circulation. Before moving to the new building, they had 1600 visits in the library pr. day, but I would expect that number to be much higher now.

Most of the universities in Palestine have developed from being secondary schools, through stages as colleges, to become universities, which for many of them were established in the seventies. They are all private, with different sources of funding. In Bethlehem they have since 1972 had their university, with funding from the Pope, among others. During a visit there in 1995, I witnessed something I would not expect in the courtyard of the university. In this Christian institution, there suddenly came round hundered Hamas-activist marching in, shouting islamic political slogans and celebrating an anniversary of the local Hamas group. The other students didn't seem to mind much, going on with their business. A student told me that, though the city of Bethlehem is mostly Christian, and the University definitely is Christian, the large amount of Muslim refugees in the camps around Bethlehem has an impact on the proportion of muslims in the student population. In the Middle East, where religion seems to put everybody on edge, the relationship between Christian and Muslim Palestinians seems surprisingly peaceful. And though the libraries reflect the religion of their donors and of the society they serve, I have not come across any traces of

religious conflicts in the libraries. The Bethlehem University Library could stand as an example of this. It is about half the size of Bir Zeit or An-Najah, but seems to work well. They have a professional leadership. The have valuable special collections. Their catalog is computerized on a system developed locally many years ago. There are students, of all subjects and of all religions, scattered around in the library all through the day.

As Bethlehem has its Christian University, one would expect an Islamic one in Gaza. In 1972 the Islamic University was established, as the first institution for higher education in the Gaza Strip. Though Islamic Law and Religion plays a major role there, they also educate teachers, nurses and engineers, among others. The Library collection has more than 100.000 items, freely available to students and staff, but also to students and general public outside the university. The library has separate opening hours for men and women. The general impression one gets is not very good, with huge stacks of uncataloged books and periodicals.

A promising, but not yet so very developed university, is the Al Quds University, with their 6 campuses around Jerusalem. There is a library on each campus, totalling 75.000 books and a staff of 26. Of these, three have master degree in library science, the others have different academic education, or they are clerical staff. In terms of the quality of electronic reference services, this may be one of the best in Palestine. But their buildings are definitely not.

Let me also mention a university for Open and Distance Learning, the Al Quds Open University, that started up in 1985. Their first study center in Jerusalem started operating in 1990. It currently operates through 9 study centers, in the major cities of Palestine, and they have about 10.000 students. This university has barely any library services, but rely very much on specially made text-books and the good will of other university libraries.

In addition to these, you have a university in Hebron with a functioning library, and one more in Gaza with a very weak library.

There are also a number of colleges giving vocational training spread out through Palestine, and many of these have medium to good collections, but seldom qualified staff.

Library and Information Science education

The educated librarians in Palestine, have got their education from all over the world: Leningrad, Cairo, Leeds, Amman, Kiev, Sofia, - and many others. The library cultures they bring back are very different, and has an impact on the possibilities to standardize and cooperate. The libraries of Palestine are in need of an institution that could develop a Library and Information Science adapted to their needs. At the moment there is no faculty of Library and Information Sciences, or any other professional LIS-activity at an academic level, in Palestine.

A study conducted by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education some years ago, looked at the possibility of establishing a library education at one of their universities. The background information they brought together, has been sent to a british library expert to be evaluated, and they are expecting recommendations to come from him in a few months time. One possible outcome of this, could be an education on diploma-level to be established at Al Quds University.

School libraries

Let me give a few comments on the school libraries also. There are three types of schools in Palestine. The private schools have, as one would expect, the best libraries. I have not come across any aggregated data on the situation of the library services in these schools. But the impression I have from personal visits, and comments given by palestinians attending private schools, is that most of these schools have libraries, often with reasonably good premises and collections. The impression is also that the staff seldom has received qualifications in library skills from any course or studies outside the school.

The governmental schools, run by the Palestinian National Authority, are developing, but slowly. The Ministry of Education show activities that promote the development of libraries and encourage reading habits, but with very limited budgets. Since the Oslo-process started giving them civil authority in a number of cities, they have now got the responsability of 1230 governmental schools, with more than half a million pupils. Less than 40 % of these schools have libraries at the moment.

The third category, the libraries for schools in the Refugee camps, also has a hard time. UNRWA is responsible for these, and they have budgets and people responsible for library services. But the ground they should cover is tremendous. UNRWA operates more than 650 schools in its five fields of operation, which in the 1998/1999 scholastic year had an enrollment of 458.716 pupils. Of the 13.915 educational staff who run the schools, very few are allocated to running or developing library services. In some of the larger schools, the libraries have been given extra resources to function as "central school libraries", serving other UNRWA school libraries in the area, as well as its own school. One example is the school library of the Kalandiya Refugee Camp just north of Jerusalem, where they also have an experienced librarian in charge of the services.

To maximize use of limited resources, UNRWA is forced to run most of its schools on double shifts with two separate groups of pupils and teachers sharing a single school building. This reduces the possibilities pupils have to access the school library more freely. That is why you will find extra initiatives, like the Ibdaa Center we are going to visit later today, so useful.

Even though the budgets of the UNRWA schools are smaller than for the governmental schools, the general impression is that they may be better off concerning educational quality, and also library services. A part of this picture, is that pupils at UNRWA schools outperform government school pupils in state qualifying examinations. Retention rates at UNRWA schools are generally high and drop-out rates fairly low.

Some general features

Let me finally mention some other general features of Palestinian libraries, before pinpointing some of the main obstacles and possibilities, that I am able to read out of this library landscape.

The study on palestinian libraries in 1996, mentioned earlier, found that only 5 % of the libraries had more than 8.000 books in Arabic, and 72 % had less than 1000 books. We understand from this that there are a number of very small libraies in Palestine.

More than half of the libraries had less than 50 square meters to spread their activities on. Only 17 % had a photocopier. Less than 4 % used a computer to handle their circulation, cataloging or searching. CDS/ISIS was the most common system then, used by 7 of the libraries in question at the time.

In the librararies answering to this study, 60 % of the staff were male. This differs from what many of us are used to in other countries. The educational level of the library staff in Palestine, showed that none of those answering to this study in 1996 had PhD in Library and Information Science (LIS), 7 % had a master in LIS, while 13 % had a BA or diploma in LIS. This probably draws a better picture than what the realities in many libraries show, as the libraries with staff qualified in library science were better represented among those answering to the study, than those whithout.

Information- and communication technology

I mentioned that this study showed that few libraries have started computerizing. As far as I have seen in my visits to libraries the last year, and talks I have had with people who deal with implementing computers in libraries, the situation has changed quite a lot. A Ramallah-developed system called LibSys has become widespread, among others through a campaign of supporting the establishing of 60 childrens libraries throughout Palestine, pushed through by the Ministry of Culture, and with participation of the extremely important Tamer Institute, that does major work in fighting illiteracy and promoting reading.

Internet-usage has also spread to many libraries. We will see two examples later today. And it is interesting that their way of utilizing this possibilty in the middle of restrictions and poor funding, have made palestinian computer and communication experts quite innovative. As the first in the world, they found a way to use microwaves to transmit internet-access over medium to short distances, at low expense. They bought some well-known equipment - used for other purposes - from a company in Tel Aviv, modified it and suddenly found themselves skipping the expensive cables otherwise necessary to lay down. In the middle of Dheisheh Refugee Camp, this goes on now, and the Bethlehem Bible College library does the same thing, among others.

But their eagerness to answer email seem still to be the subject of Arabic laid-back tradition, rather than at the speed of microwaves. For some, not for all.

Obstacles and possibilities

So what are the main obstacles and possibilities for developing Palestinian libraries? I think you have seen a few, through what I have said so far. One easy answer is of course that it all comes down to money. But then I could refrase the question, and ask: Where is the money best spent?

In my view, establishing a professional community, that has the same core of knowledge, standards and understanding of library development, could be a useful starting point. The fact that the Palestinian population of educated librarians is very small, and the fact that their education comes from so different educational institutions and countries, makes it difficult to develop standards and cooperation. Among other things, this affects their possibilities to exchange catalog-data or set up functioning systems of inter-library loans in the future. And establishing such a core of professionals, means that establishing a faculty of library science at one of the universities could be of great importance.

Another point which the Palestinian library community could benefit from considering more seriously, is developing their relationship with the international library community. This IFLA conference has shown many of us how difficult that must be - seen from their side. But this conference has also made it visible, at least to me, that their efforts in handling the boycot-situation shows too little experience in collective communication with us, their colleagues abroad. Maybe what has happened

this week is the beginning of changes in this respect.

Lastly, I must say that a good and peaceful solution to the whole political situation here, will be of the greatest importance for the possibilities of libraries to develop. I think we have come to a greater understanding of that through the events and contacts we have had this week.

Finally

... I would like to thank you for your attention. I hope you have been given some understanding of the library situation in Palestine, and I welcome comments or questions to what I have said. In addition, I hope there will be time to talk more about these issues during our trip to Dheisheh and Bethlehem this afternoon.

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